



**COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES
DEPARTMENT OF AUDITOR-CONTROLLER**

KENNETH HAHN HALL OF ADMINISTRATION
500 WEST TEMPLE STREET, ROOM 525
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90012-2766
PHONE: (213) 974-8301 FAX: (213) 626-5427

AUDITOR-CONTROLLER

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To: Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, Chairman
Supervisor Gloria Molina
Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke
Supervisor Don Knabe
Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich

From: J. Tyler McCauley *JTM*
Auditor-Controller

Subject: **DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES ADOPTIONS
REVIEW**

We have performed an operational review of DCFS' Adoptions Program (Adoptions). The request was made because of significant concerns by the former Director about the Program's outcomes. DCFS' Adoptions Division, with an annual budget of \$42 million and approximately 580 budgeted positions, is one of the largest public adoption agencies in the nation.

SCOPE/OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the operational review was to identify opportunities to modify policies and procedures to significantly streamline the adoptions process and thereby positively impact the adoptions cycle time, or the time period from when the process starts until it concludes. Our review consisted of analyzing current policies and procedures that impact the cycle time, and performing workflow analyses of key aspects of the adoptions process. Our review period covered the Spring 2001 through the Spring 2002.

We also compared actual timeframes for six major operational milestones in the adoptions process with DCFS' targeted timeframes for these areas. This data was used to identify potential problem areas for further review. Additionally, we examined the information systems the Department uses to track and monitor adoptions activities, and the ability of these systems to generate accurate, reliable, and timely data for monitoring adoptions activities.

During our review, we received input from DCFS management and staff and other relevant stakeholders, such as the juvenile court, County Counsel, private and pro bono attorneys, California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and various County representatives. Our review concentrated on policies and procedures, workflow and performance timeframes and did not include evaluating the appropriateness of actions taken in individual cases.

REVIEW SUMMARY

Our review disclosed a number of inefficient operating practices and a generally lengthy process cycle to complete adoptions. According to internal processing goals, Adoptions should complete the six major case milestones that we reviewed within approximately 12 months (one year). However, we observed through a review of actual cases that the processing time averaged 45 months. These processing standards are based upon two adoptions case handling practices that have had a significant effect on the time it takes to process an adoptions case.

First, the case management model requires adoptions workers to handle all case management responsibilities (i.e., monthly home visits, court reports, etc.) when cases are transferred to the Adoptions Division. Second, Regional staff are performing key processes that require a level of expertise that currently only the Adoption Birth Parent workers possess. The unintended consequence of processing case activities in this manner has been to make adoptions a secondary priority. In essence, Adoptions staff completes adoptions activities as time permits. This subordinating of the adoptions function has had a significant negative impact on the efficiency and timeliness of adoptions within the Department. Reengineering adoptions case-handling practices as discussed in this report should significantly improve the efficiency of the overall adoptions processing activities and focus Adoptions Division staff on their primary function, the adoption of children.

Finally, the Department has limited ability to actively and efficiently monitor staff's compliance against processing standard, as a result of a lack of data integrity and management reporting capabilities.

Adoptions Process

The Adoptions process is complex and lengthy and involves numerous divisions within DCFS, the juvenile court, adoptive parents and private and pro bono attorneys. There are approximately 18 milestones in the Adoptions process. We reviewed six of these milestones because they are major milestones and had the greatest delays. The following table lists the six major milestones, the processing standard for each milestone, and the actual average timeframes. The milestones with the greatest delays included adoption assessment requests, adoption home studies, termination of parental rights, and the court-related finalization process.

We found that inefficiencies in the adoptions process are due to two adoptions case handling practices. The first pertains to the adoptions case management model, which has been in effect since the Department of Adoptions merged with DCFS in 1984. Specifically, under this model, when the courts terminate a birth parent's parental rights, the Regional Children's Social Worker (CSW) transfers the child's case, including all case management responsibilities (i.e., monthly home visits, court reports, etc.) to the Adoptions Division. The Adoptions CSW is then responsible for all the case management responsibilities, which are mandated by the State or the court, in addition to his or her adoptions responsibilities. All Adoptions CSWs we spoke to stated they

give priority to their mandated case management responsibilities over their adoptions responsibilities. In essence, staff complete the adoptions responsibilities as time permits, which has resulted in significant delays in their completion. Unfortunately, the adoption of the child is a secondary, not primary, focus of Adoptions staff.

The second process inefficiency pertains to one of several very technical processes, e.g., termination of parental rights (TPR), which is currently decentralized to Regional staff who do not possess the expertise to complete TPRs in an efficient and effective manner. Assigning this function to specialized staff trained in the proper completion of TPRs and having them forward completed TPRs directly to the State would leverage the expertise of these workers, decrease the number of hand-offs, and therefore improve the timeliness of completion.

We also found significant delays in the finalization of Adoptions. We were prohibited from reviewing these case files to determine the exact reason(s) for the delays due to confidentiality issues. Although we were unable to confirm this, the delays may be due to a demand for pro bono legal services that exceeds the current supply.

Timeframes for Completing Certain Adoptions Milestones

Milestone	Standard	Actual Average	Responsibility
Requesting the Adoptions Assessment	Within 3 months of removing the child from the home	13 months	Regions
Initiation of a home study (5550)	None at the present time	.7 months	Regions
Completion of home study	6 months	20 months	Adoptions
Termination of Parental Rights (TPR)	1 month (30 days) from TPR to State acknowledgement	3.5 months	Regions
Transfer of case from Regions to Adoptions	Ten business days (.3 months) after TPR	1.9 months	Regions
Finalization (Court approval of adoption & termination of DCFS' jurisdiction)	2 months	5.8 months	Adoptions
Total	12.3 months ⁽¹⁾	44.9 months ⁽²⁾	

- (1) Note: Standard timeframe of 12.3 months does not include time to initiate a home study, as no standard exists. Accordingly, the standard time to complete these processes may take longer than 12.3 months.
- (2) Additionally, actual average may be longer as some of the cases reviewed had not been completed at the time of our review.

Information Systems

The Department's information systems do not produce reliable data related to the adoptions process. We reviewed case statistics and found that the data was both under- and over-stated because staff did not enter, or did not enter correctly, the necessary case information into the system. Adoptions management also stated that the utility of the basic management reports in the Department's Adoptions Information System is limited. For example, the reports do not include Regional case information, not all the data fields are populated, and there is limited ability to easily manipulate the data within the reports. This has led management to request systems data for ad-hoc reporting purposes, which has been a time-consuming process. We also found the Department can achieve significant efficiencies through automating cost of living adjustments on its adoptions assistance payment (AAP) system.

Case File Documentation

Finally, we noted that the Department needs to improve its case file documentation to ensure case files provide a complete account of the Department's involvement in the adoptions process. Incomplete documentation makes it difficult to establish accountability for delays in the adoptions process. Such data would provide supervisors and management with essential information for monitoring individual and group performance.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To significantly reduce adoptions process timeframes, the Department should change the existing case management model to ensure adoptions activities receive higher priority than case management activities. To do so, DCFS should transfer the casework functions to Regional CSWs, allowing Adoptions staff to focus solely on adoptions responsibilities. This one change in the Department's approach to the adoptions functions will have a pervasive impact on streamlining the adoptions process to achieve the goal of dramatically increasing the number of children adopted.

The Department can further improve the adoptions process by requiring Adoptions staff to complete the request to initiate a home study concurrently with the adoptions assessment, and by requiring specialized staff trained in the proper completion of TPRs to assume responsibility for completing the technical components of the TPR process. The Department should also establish a formal dialogue with representatives of both private and pro bono attorney groups to identify and discuss any systemic reason(s) for the delays in adoptions finalizations.

Finally, as DCFS continues its efforts to improve the availability of complete and accurate data, it needs to develop exception reporting capabilities for each processing standard, monitor staff's compliance with the processing standards and take corrective action where necessary.

CORRECTIVE ACTIONS INITIATED BY DEPARTMENT

The Department has taken a number of actions to improve its adoptions operations. For example, the Department hired an Adoptions Division Chief in January 2002. In April 2002, in response to a February 2002 Board motion, the Department issued to the Board its 14 point plan to streamline its adoptions process. In general, this Streamlining Plan called for clarification of roles and responsibilities of regional and adoptions staff, the streamlining of the home study process, and an enhancement of the Division's data reporting and analysis. We refer to this Streamlining Plan, as appropriate, throughout this report.

Although the Department has initiated positive steps towards improving the overall adoptions process, it does not appear the steps will have a significant impact on the adoptions process. Reengineering adoptions case handling and changing other practices as discussed in this report should significantly improve adoptions processing timeframes and increase the number of children adopted.

REVIEW OF REPORT

We thank DCFS management and staff for their cooperation and assistance during our review. We reviewed our report with Department management and they generally agree with our findings and recommendations for streamlining their adoptions process. The Department has provided an initial response to our report (Attachment III), and will provide the Board with their detailed response within 60 days of the issuance of our report.

If you have any questions regarding this report, please contact me, or have your staff contact Pat McMahon at (213) 974-0729 or DeWitt Roberts at (213) 974-0301.

JTM:PTM:DR

Attachments

c: David E. Janssen, Chief Administrative Officer
Marjorie Kelly, Interim Director, Department of Children and Family Services
Lloyd W. Pellman, County Counsel
Violet Varona-Lukens, Executive Officer
Public Information Office
Commission for Children and Families
Audit Committee

Los Angeles County
Department of Children and Family Services

Adoptions Review

November 2002

Prepared by:
Department of Auditor-Controller

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Department of Children and Family Services Adoptions Review

BACKGROUND

The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Adoptions Division is one of the largest public adoption agencies in the nation. The Division's Fiscal Year (FY) 2001-02 budget, supported primarily by State and federal funds, is approximately \$42.0 million. The Division has 579 budgeted positions. The Adoptions Division Chief reports to the Chief of the Bureau of Children and Family Services, one of four Bureau Chiefs reporting directly to the Director of DCFS.

The Division's mission is to recruit, prepare and support safe, stable and nurturing permanent adoptive homes for children in a timely manner, but only after the Department has made efforts to maintain or reunify children with their families. This mission includes finding adoptive homes for children, who in many instances, because of age, background, physical or intellectual handicaps or emotional problems, are difficult to place. The Division also offers a full range of adoption and post adoption services, as well as counseling to birth parents who are considering permanent plans for their children. During FY 2001-02, the Department facilitated 2,904 adoptions.

We performed an operational review of DCFS' Adoptions Program. The request was made because of significant concerns by the former Director about the Program's outcomes.

SCOPE/OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the operational review was to identify opportunities to modify policies and procedures to significantly streamline the adoptions process and thereby positively impact the adoptions cycle time, or the time period from when the process starts until it concludes. Our review consisted of analyzing current policies and procedures that impact the cycle time, and performing workflow analyses of key aspects of the adoptions process.

We also compared actual timeframes for specific operational aspects of the adoptions process with DCFS' targeted timeframes for these areas. This data was used to identify potential problem areas for further review. Additionally, we examined the information systems the Department uses to track and monitor adoption activities, and the ability of these systems to generate accurate, reliable, and timely data for monitoring adoption activities.

During our review, we received input from DCFS management and staff and other relevant stakeholders, such as the juvenile court, County Counsel, private and pro bono attorneys, California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and various County representatives. Our review concentrated on policies and procedures, workflow and performance timeframes and did not include evaluating the appropriateness of actions taken in individual cases.

OVERVIEW OF THE ADOPTIONS PROCESS

A child enters the foster care system when the Department determines that the parents are either unable or unwilling to care for the child, or it is unsafe for the child to remain in the home. The Department will place the child in a foster home and begin family reunification services, where appropriate. Family reunification is a time-limited service intended to prevent or remedy neglect, abuse, or exploitation, when the child cannot safely remain at home.

Within three months of entering the foster care system, Department policy requires a Regional Children's Social Worker (CSW) to request the Adoptions Division to complete an "Adoptions Assessment." The assessment is one of the first steps in the concurrent planning process, the goal of which is to expedite permanency by having a permanent "backup" plan in the event family reunification is unsuccessful.

In cases where birth parents fail to complete court ordered family reunification services, or where DCFS determines birth parents are unable to care for their child, the courts will terminate family reunification services. At that point, the courts, in conjunction with the Regional CSW, will terminate a birth parent's parental rights. Upon termination of parental rights (TPR), the Regional CSW will transfer the child's case, including all case management responsibilities (i.e., monthly home visits, court reports, etc.), to the Adoptions Division. The Adoptions Division will continue adoptive placement services by locating suitable adoptive parents for the child and completing a home study. The Adoptions Division is also responsible for filing TPR documents with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS).

Once the Supervising CSW (SCSW) approves the home study, the State has acknowledged receipt of the TPR, and the CSW has fully disclosed the child's medical and psychological history to the adoptive parents, the Division can adoptively place the child. "Adoptively placed" is when DCFS and the adoptive parents sign an adoption agreement, which legally transforms the placement to a pre-adoptive home. Once adoptively placed, DCFS, in conjunction with the courts, can finalize the adoption and terminate the Department's jurisdiction. Details of the Adoptions process are illustrated in Attachment I.

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Adoptions Process

The Adoptions process is complex and lengthy and involves numerous divisions within DCFS, the juvenile court, adoptive parents and private and pro bono attorneys. There are approximately 18 milestones in the Adoptions process. We reviewed six of these milestones because they are major milestones and had the greatest delays. Based on Adoptions internal processing standards, the six milestones we reviewed can be

completed within approximately 12 months. However, we found through a review of actual cases that these milestones averaged 45 months.

The following table lists the six major milestones in the Adoptions process that we reviewed, the processing standards for each milestone, and the actual timeframes.

Table 1
Timeframes for Completing Certain Adoption Milestones

Milestone	Standard	Actual Average	Responsibility
Requesting the Adoptions Assessment	Within 3 months of removing the child from the home	13 months	Regions
Initiation of a home study (5550)	None at the present time	.7 months	Regions
Completion of home study	6 months	20 months	Adoptions
Termination of Parental Rights (TPR)	1 month (30 days) from TPR to State acknowledgement	3.5 months	Regions
Transfer of case from Regions to Adoptions	Ten business days (.3 months) after TPR	1.9 months	Regions
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Total	12.3 months ⁽¹⁾	44.9 months ⁽²⁾	

(1) Note: Standard timeframe of 12.3 months does not include time to initiate a home study, as no standard exists. Accordingly, the standard time to complete these processes may take longer than 12.3 months.

(2) Additionally, actual average may be longer as some of the cases reviewed had not been completed at the time of our review.

In April 2002, in response to a Board motion, DCFS issued a 14-point plan to streamline its adoption process. In general, the Streamlining Plan called for clarification of roles and responsibilities of regional and adoptions staff, the streamlining of the home study process, and an enhancement of the Division's data reporting and analysis. We refer to this Streamlining Plan, as appropriate, throughout this report.

Inefficiency of Case Management Model and Decentralization

As discussed in detail in the following sections, the greatest process inefficiency lies in the adoptions case management model, which has been in effect since the Department

of Adoptions merged with DCFS in 1984. At that time, DCFS believed adoption workers would integrate better into the Department by taking on casework functions of the children they served. Specifically, under this model, when the courts terminate a birth parent's parental rights, the Regional CSW transfers the child's case, including all case management responsibilities (i.e., monthly home visits, court reports, etc.) to the Adoptions Division. The Adoptions Social Worker is then responsible for all the case management responsibilities, which are mandated by the State or the court, in addition to his or her adoptions work. All Adoptions staff we spoke to stated they give priority to their mandated case management responsibilities over their adoption responsibilities, but that a more efficient use of their skills would be to focus solely on their adoption responsibilities, including the home study. (We note that the Department requires Adoption CSWs to hold a Master's Degree in Social Work while it requires Regional CSWs to hold a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work.) The Department's Adoption Integration Plan, which the Department developed in the summer of 2001 but never implemented, proposed transferring casework functions to the Regional CSWs, which would allow Adoption CSWs to focus solely on their Adoption responsibilities.

In essence, Adoptions staff complete the Adoptions responsibilities as time permits, which has resulted in significant delays in their completion, particularly in the completion of home studies. Unfortunately, through no fault of their own, the adoption of the child is a secondary, not primary, focus of staff.

We found the responsibility for several other very technical processes, e.g., termination of parental rights, is currently decentralized among the Department's regional staff who do not currently possess the expertise to complete TPRs in an efficient and effective manner. Assigning specialized staff to the Regional offices as described in this report would leverage the expertise of these staff, decrease the number of hand-offs, and improve the timeliness of completion.

Following, we discuss the specific reasons for the delays in the milestones we reviewed and make recommendations, when appropriate, to streamline the adoptions process.

Adoption Assessments

Before a Regional CSW can refer a case to Adoptions, an Adoptions Liaison must complete an adoption assessment, a preliminary assessment to determine the best permanency plan (i.e., adoptions) for the child. This assessment begins the concurrent planning process, whereby Regional CSWs work jointly with Adoptions CSWs in simultaneously providing family reunification and permanency placement services (i.e., adoptions).

As noted in Table 1, Department policy requires Regional CSWs to request an adoption assessment within three months of removing the child from the home. However, the process averaged 13 months for the 27 case files we reviewed. Delays ranged from between two and 30 months.

Regional CSWs we spoke with indicated they were either unaware of the three month policy, or they were simply too busy to request the assessment within established timeframes. We spoke with DCFS training academy staff and reviewed curriculum from the social worker academy, noting that such policies and procedures are included in the CSW training modules. This policy is also in the Department's written policies and procedures, available to all CSWs on DCFS' intranet site.

Regional CSWs are presently responsible for requesting the adoption assessment due to their knowledge of the child and the family's circumstances. We believe this assignment of responsibility is appropriate and that the responsibility should stay with Regional staff. However, DCFS management needs to reinforce existing procedures with staff.

Recommendation

- 1. DCFS management reinforce the existing adoption assessment three-month policy with staff and monitor for compliance.**

Initiation of Home Studies and/or an Adoptive Match

After the Adoptions Liaison determines adoption is an appropriate case plan, the Regional CSW must complete a Form 5550/5400 (i.e., documents that activate a home study and/or initiates an effort to match the child with adoptive parents). The Regional CSW forwards the assessment and the Form 5550/5400 to the Adoptions Division to either initiate a home study or search for an adoptive match.

As noted in Table 1, there is currently no standard time for initiating a home study and/or the search for an adoptive match. However, the process averaged 22 days (.7 months) for the 25 case files we reviewed. Delays ranged from between zero and 57 days (1.9 months), as follows:

- Twelve cases (48%) were complete as of our review date and Regional CSWs took 10 days on average to complete the Form 5550/5400 from the date of the adoption assessment.
- For 13 cases (52%), the Form 5550/5400 was outstanding for an average of 34 days and still not complete as of our review date.

Our review disclosed inconsistencies in the manner in which the Form 5550/5400 is prepared, which contributes to delays in home studies and/or adoptive matches. For example, some Adoptions Liaisons request Regional CSWs to complete the 5550/5400 at the same time the Regional CSW requests the adoption assessment, while others call the Regional CSW to request they complete the Form 5550/5400. In one office, we noted the Liaisons created a form that they attach to the completed assessment instructing Regional CSWs how to complete the Form 5550/5400.

The Department can improve the efficiency of this milestone at the front end of the adoptions process by consolidating responsibility for the completion of the Form 5500/5400 with Adoptions staff who should complete these forms immediately after completion of the adoption assessment, if necessary. Consolidation of these processes will streamline operations and will reduce processing times. In April 2002, the Department began a 10-month pilot in one of its Regional offices where Adoptions Liaisons prepare the Form 5550/5400 concurrently with the adoption assessment. The Department should assess the pilot's results, and if the process change results in a more efficient process, the Department should rollout these procedures department-wide.

Recommendation

- 2. DCFS management assess the pilot's results, and if the process change results in a more efficient process, the Department should rollout these procedures department-wide.**

Home Study

State regulation requires counties to complete an adoptive home study, the process used to determine prospective parents' suitability for adoption, before finalizing an adoptive placement. The home study requires adoptive parents to participate in a number of interviews, and to provide a number of documents regarding the family's health, employment, education, and criminal background, if any.

Currently, there is no DCFS policy regarding the length of the home study, although the Division's goal is to complete the home study within six months. This is a reasonable initial standard based on the complexity of the home study process and our discussions with CDSS and other counties. However, the Department should re-evaluate the standard after removing case management responsibilities from Adoptions staff.

As noted in Table 1, the home study process averaged 20 months for the 41 case files we reviewed as of May 2001. Delays ranged from between four and 41 months, as follows:

- For 23 (56%) cases, the CSWs took an average of 18 months to complete the home studies.
- For 18 (44%) cases, the SCSW had not approved the home study as of our review date. These home studies had been in progress for an average of 22 months as of our review date.

We selected an additional sample of 20 case files as of December 2001 and did not note any material improvement.

As discussed next, there are a number of factors affecting the Department's ability to process adoptive home studies, once initiated, in an efficient and effective manner. This includes a case management model in which Adoptions CSWs are responsible for both casework functions (i.e., State-mandated monthly home visits and the preparation of court reports) and adoption functions, and a lack of timely, documented follow-up by Adoptions CSWs to complete the home study process. Additionally, we found the Department does not obtain necessary criminal clearances of adoptive parents prior to beginning the home study process, to determine if the adoptive parents meet certain background requirements.

Case Management Model

As noted, Adoptions CSWs are currently responsible for both casework functions (i.e., State-mandated monthly home visits to ensure the safety and well-being of the child and the preparation of court reports) and adoption related functions (i.e., completion of home studies). Adoptions CSW and SCSW staff we interviewed stated that they give priority to their case management responsibilities, which are mandated by the State or the court, over their adoption responsibilities. Because of these conflicting priorities, adoptions CSWs complete home studies and other Adoption responsibilities as time permits, which has resulted in significant delays in their completion.

In order to complete the home study and other adoptions processes within targeted timeframes, and possibly reduce the timeframes, DCFS should change the existing case management model to ensure adoption activities receive higher priority than case management activities. To do so, DCFS should transfer the casework functions to the Regional CSWs, allowing Adoptions CSWs to focus on adoption responsibilities. This one change would not only align the duties of the Adoptions CSW with their experience and education, but would have a pervasive impact on streamlining the adoptions process and attaining the Department's goal of dramatically increasing the number of children adopted. This model is consistent with the Adoptions Division's Integration Plan, which was never implemented.

Recommendation

- 3. DCFS management transfer the casework functions to the Regional CSWs, allowing Adoptions CSWs to focus on adoption responsibilities.**

Lack of Follow-up in Home Study Process

Adoptions CSWs stated that adoptive parents often do not cooperate in providing the necessary documentation. However, in the files we reviewed, Adoptions CSWs rarely documented the difficulties they encountered and/or the dates they requested and received certain information. We also noted little or no evidence to suggest that supervisory intervention occurred in these instances. It appears that there is generally a lack of timely, documented follow-up by Adoptions CSWs to complete the home study

process, particularly in instances where they have an exemption from conducting mandated monthly home visits.

We also observed the Department's home study checklist does not provide accountability for home study documents. For example, the checklist does not require Adoptions CSWs to record the date they requested and/or received certain documents. The checklist provides only the name of the document and a space to indicate its receipt by the Adoptions CSW.

DCFS needs to take the following actions to ensure Adoptions CSWs complete home studies in a timely manner, and case files reflect a continuing account of staff involvement in the case and compliance with Division policies:

- Develop a policy requiring Adoptions CSWs to complete home studies within six months of the home study start date. Procedures should include a requirement for Adoptions CSWs to clearly document and justify reasons for delays.
- Include in the home study packet a notice clearly outlining the Department's expectations of parents for completing and submitting required home study documents.
- Develop a letter and forward to each parent within 30 days of opening the home study, indicating which documents and/or tasks remain incomplete. Reinforce due dates and the delays that will occur if documents are submitted late.
- Establish specific "checkpoints" instructing Adoptions CSWs on how to proceed when certain matters are not resolved timely (i.e., adoptive parents not cooperating after repeated requests to provide home study documents).
- Develop a system with specific intervals (i.e., every 30 days) requiring SCSWs to review case progress, intervene where necessary to avoid unnecessary delays, and document their decisions.
- Modify the home study checklist to provide space for CSWs to record the dates they requested and received documents.
- Add the revised home study checklist and its prescribed use to the Department's case file documentation procedures.

Recommendations

DCFS management:

- 4. Develop a policy requiring CSWs to complete home studies within six months of the home study start date. Procedures should include a**

requirement for CSWs to clearly document and justify reasons for delays.

5. Include in the home study packet a notice clearly outlining the Department's expectations of parents for completing and submitting required home study documents.
6. Develop a letter and forward to each applicant within 30 days of opening the home study, indicating what documents and/or items remain incomplete. Reinforce due dates and the delays that will occur if documents are submitted late.
7. Establish specific "checkpoints" instructing CSWs on how to proceed when certain matters are not resolved timely (i.e., adoptive parents not cooperating after repeated requests to provide home study documents).
8. Develop a system with specific intervals (i.e., every 30 days) requiring SCSWs to review case progress, intervene where necessary to avoid unnecessary delays, and document their decisions.
9. Modify the home study checklist to provide space for CSWs to record the dates they requested and received documents.
10. Add the revised home study checklist and its prescribed use to the Department's case file documentation procedures.

Live Scans

Currently, State regulations do not specify when in the home study process the Department should live scan the adoptive parent.

A live scan is a process in which the Department fingerprints foster or adoptive parents and runs the fingerprints through criminal justice agencies to identify criminal information about the parent. All live scans include a subsequent arrest notification service (i.e., "rapback"), which automatically notifies the Department if the parent is convicted of a crime in the State of California subsequent to the date of the live scan. This service remains in effect until the Department cancels it.

Because adoptive parents must meet certain background requirements, DCFS should not commence the home study process on adoptive parents to only determine later that the adoptive parents are ineligible based on the criminal record identified through the live scan. Accordingly, DCFS should live scan adoptive parents prior to beginning the home study process.

Recommendation

- 11. DCFS management require adoptive parents receive a live scan before commencing the home study.**

Termination of Parental Rights

In cases where birth parents fail to complete court ordered family reunification services, or where DCFS determines birth parents are unable to care for their child, the courts, in conjunction with DCFS, will terminate family reunification services. At that point, the courts and DCFS will proceed with terminating the birth parent's parental rights. Upon termination of parental rights (TPR), the Regional CSW will transfer the child's case, including all case management responsibilities to the Adoptions Division. The Adoptions Division will continue adoptive placement services by completing the home study, or by locating suitable adoptive parents for the child. The Adoptions Division is also responsible for forwarding TPR documents to the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). CDSS regulations require counties to file TPR documents with the State before the Department can adoptively place a child.

Before April 1999, Adoptions staff completed the TPRs. In April 1999, management transferred the responsibility to Regional CSWs. However, Regional CSWs we spoke to stated that the TPR is very complex, and they did not have the experience and/or the training to complete them correctly. This results in delays in this process. Further, even with appropriate training, they stated they do not complete TPRs frequently enough to become proficient. In response to these concerns, in April 2001, the Department placed eight Adoptions Birthparent Liaisons in the Regions to assist Regional CSWs in properly preparing TPRs. The TPRs on the cases we reviewed were processed after April 2001.

As noted in Table 1, the standard for obtaining State acknowledgment of the termination of a child's parental rights is one month. However, the process averaged 104 days (3.5 months) for the 20 cases we reviewed, with delays ranging from 21 (.7 months) to 171 (5.7 months) days, as follows:

- In 14 (70%) instances, the Department took on average 81 days to obtain State acknowledgment of the TPR. In general, we found the State acknowledged the TRP within seven days of receipt.
- In 6 (30%) instances, the Department had not forwarded the cases to the State for acknowledgment as of our review date. From the TPR date, these six cases remained outstanding for an average of 159 days.

The de-centralization of responsibility for TRP completion to Regional staff has resulted in an inefficient and cumbersome process, which requires eight distinct hand-offs among various Regional and Adoptions staff. (See Attachment II, which illustrates the present manner in which TRP documents flow through the Department and ultimately to the State.) The Department's Streamlining Plan calls for an increase in the number of

Adoptions Liaisons (who will be called Permanency Liaisons,) cross-trained in performing the TPR duties of the existing Birth Parent Liaisons. However, this process change does not address the inefficiencies discussed above.

DCFS management should assign the technical tasks of completing a TPR (i.e., completing documents, publishing, noticing, etc.) to specialized staff trained in the TPR process. The specialized staff should be located in and assigned to the Regional offices, and should have responsibility for forwarding the TPR to the State for acknowledgment. Doing so would eliminate the number of hand-offs among various Regional and Adoptions staff, resulting in a more streamlined process. Responsibility for the actual clinical assessment to terminate parental rights should remain with the primary CSW (the Regional CSW).

Recommendation

- 12. DCFS management assign the technical tasks of completing a TPR (i.e., completing documents, publishing, noticing, etc.) to specialized staff trained in the TPR process. The specialized staff should be located in and assigned to the Regional offices, and should have responsibility for forwarding the TPR to the State for acknowledgment.**

Transferring Cases to Adoptions

As noted in Table 1, the standard for transferring a case from Regional staff to Adoptions is ten business days after TPR. However, the process averaged 56 days (1.9 months) for the 24 case files we reviewed. Delays ranged from between five (.2 months) and 171 days (5.7 months), as follows:

- In 19 (79%) instances, Regional CSWs took on average 41 business days to transfer the cases to Adoptions.
- For five (21%) cases, Regional CSWs had not transferred the cases to Adoptions as of our review date. These cases remained outstanding for an average of 115 business days from TPR.

CSWs we spoke to indicated they were either unaware the 10-day transfer policy existed, or they were too busy to prepare the case for transfer to the Adoptions Division.

Upon receipt of the actual hard copy case file, the Adoptions assignment desk transfers the child's case, including all casework responsibilities, to an Adoptions CSW. The assignment desk also updates the Child Welfare Services Case Management System (CWS/CMS) to indicate the Adoptions CSW assigned to the case. Departmental procedure also requires the use of a case transfer check sheet. However, this document only accounts for case transfers from the Regional CSW to Adoptions. It does not account for case file transfers among the Adoptions assignment desk, the Adoptions CSW and/or the Adoptions SCSW.

DCFS staff do not enter TPR dates into CWS/CMS until State acknowledgment occurs. This makes it difficult to monitor cases that should be in Adoptions and are not. DCFS staff should enter the TPR date into CWS/CMS at the time the courts terminate parental rights. In addition, Adoptions staff should monitor cases that have been TPR'd to ensure they are transferred to Adoptions within established timeframes.

Under our proposed reorganization, the majority of these processes, particularly the transfer of the hard copy case file from Regional staff to Adoptions staff, would no longer occur after the Termination of Parental Rights as the Regional staff would continue to be responsible for case management functions until the child is "adoptively placed." Nevertheless, DCFS management can improve the efficiency of the file transfer process at that time by:

- Developing and implementing a new case file transfer policy and monitor staff for compliance.
- Developing and/or revising the current transfer check sheet to require all staff (i.e., Regional and Adoptions) to sign and date the document upon receipt of the case file.

Recommendations

DCFS management:

- 13. Develop and implement a new case file transfer policy and monitor staff for compliance.**
- 14. Develop and/or revise the current transfer check sheet to require all staff (i.e., Regional and Adoptions) to sign and date the document upon receipt of the case file.**

Finalizations

Upon adoptive placement, the CSW will assist the family in obtaining an attorney to prepare the case for finalization. If the family cannot afford a private attorney, the CSW will refer the case to one of two pro bono attorney groups, who will assist the family with their finalization. Pro bono attorney groups finalized approximately 75% of all adoptions cases during calendar year 2001. The finalization process ends with the court approving or acknowledging the adoption and terminating the Department's jurisdiction over the child. The standard time to finalize an adoption from the date the case is referred to an attorney is two months (see Table 1). However, the process averaged approximately 6 months for the 60 case files we reviewed. Delays ranged from between one and 29 months.

To determine the timeliness with which the attorneys complete finalizations, we reviewed 30 cases with private attorney representation and 30 cases represented by pro bono attorney groups and noted the following:

- **Private attorneys** took an average of five months to finalize adoptions. Delays ranged from between one and 29 months. By eliminating the three cases that took in excess of 10 months to finalize, the average decreased to 3.5 months.
- **Pro Bono Attorneys**
 - ✓ For 24 (80%) cases, the pro bono attorneys took an average of six months to finalize the cases. Delays ranged from between two and nine months.
 - ✓ For six (20%) cases, the pro bono attorneys had not finalized the cases as of our review date, and the cases remained outstanding for an average of nine months. Delays ranged from between eight and 12 months.

We requested to review the case files to confirm the reasons for the delays. One pro bono attorney group would not allow us to review the files due to confidentiality reasons. However, an attorney from this group stated that delays might be due to incorrect Adoptions Assistance Payment (AAP) rates, which Adoptions staff establish. However, we reviewed this issue (see discussion below) and found incorrect rates did not delay finalization. The other pro bono attorney group did not return our calls.

DCFS should establish a formal dialogue with representatives of both private and pro bono attorney groups to identify and discuss any systemic reason(s) for the delays in finalizations. For example, it may be that the demand for pro bono services at this point is greater than the attorney services available. If this is the case, the Department, in conjunction with concerned stakeholders, could undertake an initiative to increase pro bono services. Finally, on an ongoing, case-by-case basis, Adoptions staff should follow-up with the representing attorney if the adoption is not finalized within 60 days of the date referred.

Recommendations

DCFS management:

- 15. Establish a formal dialogue with representatives of both private and pro bono attorney groups to identify and discuss any systemic reason(s) for the delays in finalizations.**
- 16. Ensure Adoptions staff follow-up with the representing attorney if the adoption is not finalized within 60 days of the date referred.**

Finalization Inquiries

To resolve AAP rate conflicts and other disputes raised by the pro bono attorneys, in 1999 the Department implemented an informal process whereby pro bono attorneys can submit an “inquiry” to DCFS when the attorney disagrees with the rate established by the Adoptions CSW, or when the attorney has other issues to resolve before finalization. The Department investigates the inquiry and forwards a written disposition to the attorney regarding the Department’s final decision.

Adoptions Division maintains a log of all inquiries from the pro bono attorney groups. We selected all 125 inquiries submitted to DCFS between July and December 2001, and noted the following:

- For 58 (47%) inquiries, the Department provided documentation to support the type of inquiry, the inquiry disposition, and the time to disposition. We noted that 54 (93%) of the inquiries were due to the AAP rate, of which 40 (74%) the Department agreed to change. On average, the Department responded to attorney inquiries within 26 days. Response times ranged from between three and 109 days. As of our review date, attorneys finalized 53 (91%) of the 58 cases. There was no documentation in the inquiry files to indicate why the attorneys had not finalized the remaining five (9%) of 58 cases.
- For 18 (14%) cases, we were unable to fully evaluate the nature of the inquiry, the type of disposition, and the time to disposition, as the Department was unable to provide complete documentation. However, from the documentation that was available, it appears most of the inquiries pertained to the accuracy of the AAP rate.
- For 49 (39%) cases, the Department was unable to provide documentation to support the nature and disposition of the inquiry. However, as of our review date, the Department reported finalization dates for all 49 cases.

It should be noted that, in some instances, the attorney finalized the case before receiving DCFS’ response, or he or she finalized the case shortly after receiving the Department’s disposition. In other instances, the case was finalized even prior to the attorney submitting the inquiry. Accordingly, it appears attorneys are not holding up the finalization process until the Department investigates and resolves inquiries.

To improve the time to complete the finalization process, DCFS needs to implement the following recommendations.

Recommendations

DCFS management:

- 17. Provide additional training to Adoptions CSWs in determining the correct AAP rate upon adoptive placement.**
- 18. Develop and implement an assessment tool for Adoptions CSWs to use in determining and documenting the correct AAP rate.**
- 19. Establish standardized written procedures for the attorney inquiry process, and make this process available to all attorneys (private as well as pro bono) participating in Departmental finalizations. Procedures should include timeframes for responding to attorney inquiries and mechanisms for following up to ensure finalizations occur in a timely manner.**
- 20. Maintain documentation to support the nature of attorney inquiries, the Department's disposition, and the respective dates.**

Information Systems

We examined the information systems the Department uses to track and monitor adoption activities, and the ability of these systems to generate accurate and reliable data for monitoring and managing adoptions operations. We noted the following.

CWS/CMS is a State run system through which all counties in the State enter and track child case data (i.e., date entered foster care system, TPR date, home study start date, etc.). The Adoptions Information System (AIS) is a Web-based system developed by the Department's Bureau of Information Technology Services (ITS) to replace 17 standalone Adoptions systems and provide an applicant-tracking tool. CWS/CMS does not link the adoptive applicant and the child until adoptive placement occurs, whereas AIS links the adoptive applicant and the child during the home study process. AIS is intended to be a temporary system for tracking applicant data, until the State develops a CWS/CMS module to accommodate applicant tracking. The Department estimates that the applicant module of CWS/CMS will be available in approximately five years. AIS also has the ability to produce management reports to monitor desired Adoptions applicant processes.

In general, our review disclosed the Department has limited ability to actively and efficiently monitor staff's compliance against adoption process standards, as a result of the lack of data integrity and management reporting capabilities discussed in the systems section below. However, as DCFS continues its efforts to improve the availability of complete and accurate data, it needs to develop exception reporting capabilities pertaining to each case processing standard, monitor staff's compliance with the processing standards and take corrective action where necessary.

Recommendation

- 21. DCFS management develop exception reporting capabilities pertaining to each case processing standard, monitor staff's compliance with the processing standards and take corrective action where necessary.**

Data Integrity

We requested ITS prepare an ad-hoc report detailing from the CWS/CMS and AIS systems all cases that had not been adoptively placed within six months of State acknowledgement of TPR (i.e., outstanding cases). The data indicated 6,262 active adoptions cases as of May 1, 2001, of which 2,318 cases met the criteria described above.

We selected a sample of 73 cases to determine the validity of the data. We found that 25 of the 73 (34%) cases reviewed did not meet the criteria described above and should not have been represented as such on the Department's database. We performed additional testwork and identified 105 cases that appeared to meet the criteria but which were not included in the 2,318 cases. We reviewed 45 (43%) of these cases and found that 17 (38%) should have been included but were not. The database was both overstated and understated because staff did not enter, or did not enter correctly, the necessary information (e.g., adoptive placement dates, State acknowledgement of TRP date, and changes in case plans) into the system.

ITS and Adoptions staff agree there are problems with respect to data integrity, despite efforts to train staff and to correct data that was either not previously entered, or incorrectly entered. Staff we spoke to stated that CSWs often do not enter data due to time constraints, or they enter data incorrectly. There also appears to be a lack of uniformity with respect to which staff enters the data. For example, some CSWs enter their own data, some have unit clerks enter the data, and some SCSWs do the data entry for their staff.

Failure to define and enforce clear lines of responsibility makes it difficult for management to establish accountability when errors or problems exist. In addition, ITS management indicated that for the period covered by our review, there were no quality control mechanisms in place to ensure staff entered data timely and accurately. Accordingly, DCFS needs to implement the following recommendations.

Recommendations

DCFS management:

- 22. Develop and implement procedures detailing who is responsible for entering data and specific timeframes for completion.**

23. Continue existing efforts to train staff and to correct case data in CWS/CMS that staff either never entered or incorrectly entered.
24. Develop and implement periodic quality assurance reviews to ensure data input is both timely and accurate.
25. Investigate noted instances of noncompliance with required procedures and take corrective action.

Management Reporting

AIS was developed to produce approximately 65 standard template reports regarding different aspects of the adoptions process (e.g., adoptions finalizations, cases not updated, etc.). However, current Adoptions management stated that the utility of some of the reports is limited. For example, the reports do not include Regional case information, not all the data fields are currently populated, and there is limited ability to easily manipulate the data within the reports. These limitations, coupled with management's changing data needs, have led the Division, with the assistance of ITS, to focus on the development of ad-hoc reporting abilities.

Management is aware of the need for reliable data to manage its operations, and this is a consistent theme throughout the Streamlining Plan. Management should continue its efforts to provide full ad hoc query and reporting capabilities through AIS to properly manage and monitor its operations.

Recommendation

26. DCFS management continue efforts to provide full ad hoc query and reporting capabilities through the Adoptions Information System to properly manage and monitor its operations.

Adoptions Assistance Program (AAP) Payment System

DCFS' Revenue Enhancement section operates the Adoptions Assistance Program (AAP) payment system. AAP is primarily a federally funded program that provides adoptive parents with ongoing financial support, after they have signed adoptive placement papers. AAP payments are provided at the same amount as the parents would have received if the child was in foster care, and the amount automatically increases with the child's age at rates consistent with foster care increases. AAP can also increase at any time if the child develops special needs.

Revenue Enhancement staff stated that the AAP payment system requires manual data input to update each file. For example, to process periodic cost of living adjustments (COLAs), Revenue Enhancement staff need to manually calculate and input the new rate, for each month, for each adoptive parent. Currently, staff manually adjusts over 16,000 adoptive placements. To process the most recent COLA adjustment (effective

July 1, 2001), Revenue Enhancement used over 5,000 overtime hours, not including regular working hours, over a nine-month period. We estimated that it cost the Department approximately \$135,000 to process this COLA adjustment. In some years, AAP rates receive two COLA increases.

The Department has recognized the need to automate the AAP COLA adjustment process, and expects to initiate an automation project by the Fall 2002. The Department should ensure it automates the AAP COLA adjustment process as soon as possible.

Recommendation

27. DCFS management automate the adjustment of Adoptions Assistance Program rates for cost of living adjustments as soon as possible.

Case File Documentation

Model Case Format (MCF) is the Department's procedure for filing all case-related documents in an organized, uniform system. The procedures prescribe a series of color-coded folders for filing case-related documents. For example, there is a manila court documents folder, in which CSWs file all court-related records (i.e., minute orders, court reports, etc.). MCF requires CSWs to keep records current, and that records provide a continuing account of the Department's involvement in providing services to the child. In addition, MCF requires all records, case notes, etc., be clear, legible and comprehensive.

Our review disclosed numerous deficiencies in the manner in which Adoptions caseworkers document contacts with adoptive parents, including requests for information, difficulties encountered, and supervisory intervention, if any. Thirty (63%) of 48 case files we reviewed contained at least one or more of the following deficiencies.

- **Case files were missing critical documents.** For example, we noted a number of instances where documents such as case activity logs, TPR Minute Orders, home study checklists, State acknowledgment dates, etc., detailing the progress or status of a case were missing. In some instances, we located another child's case activity logs in the file under review.
- **Case files were incomplete and poorly documented.** We noted a number of instances where case activity logs, home study checklists, etc., did not provide sufficient detail regarding Adoptions CSW contacts with adoptive parents, other social workers, etc. In addition, the case files did not consistently indicate dates home study documents were requested and received, supervisory intervention, case transfers to another social worker, etc. We also noted instances where case activity logs, applicant intake history forms, home study checklists and other pertinent

documents were not dated and/or signed, making it difficult to establish accountability.

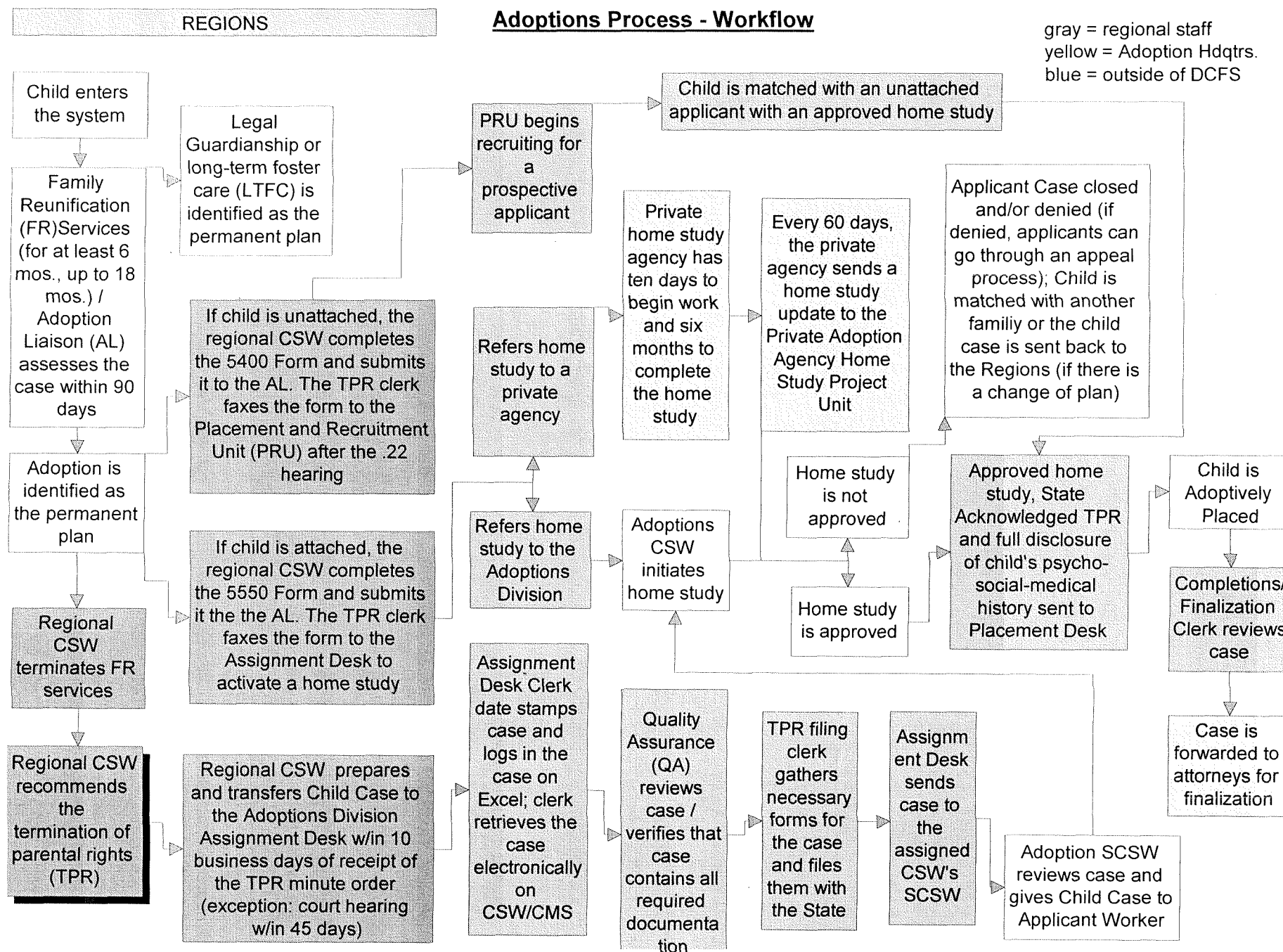
- **Case files were unorganized.** We noted a number of instances where pertinent case file documents (i.e., court documents, case activity logs, etc.) were located in an inappropriate section of the case file. This makes it difficult for the Adoptions CSW, other CSWs, supervisors, and audit staff to locate necessary documents.
- **Case file documentation was ineffective.** We noted a number of instances where case activity logs and other documents were completely illegible, making it difficult for anyone reviewing the case to determine its status. We also noted instances where Adoptions CSWs filed unnecessary duplicate copies of documents in the case file.

Adoptions CSWs indicated that due to time constraints, they do not consistently or thoroughly document items in the case file. To improve the quality and completeness of case file documentation, DCFS needs to reinforce existing documentation standards prescribed by MCF, including filing requirements and documentation standards for ensuring case files provide a complete and continuous account of the Department's involvement in providing services to the child. In addition, DCFS management needs to monitor staff's compliance with documentation requirements and take appropriate disciplinary action for those who do not comply.

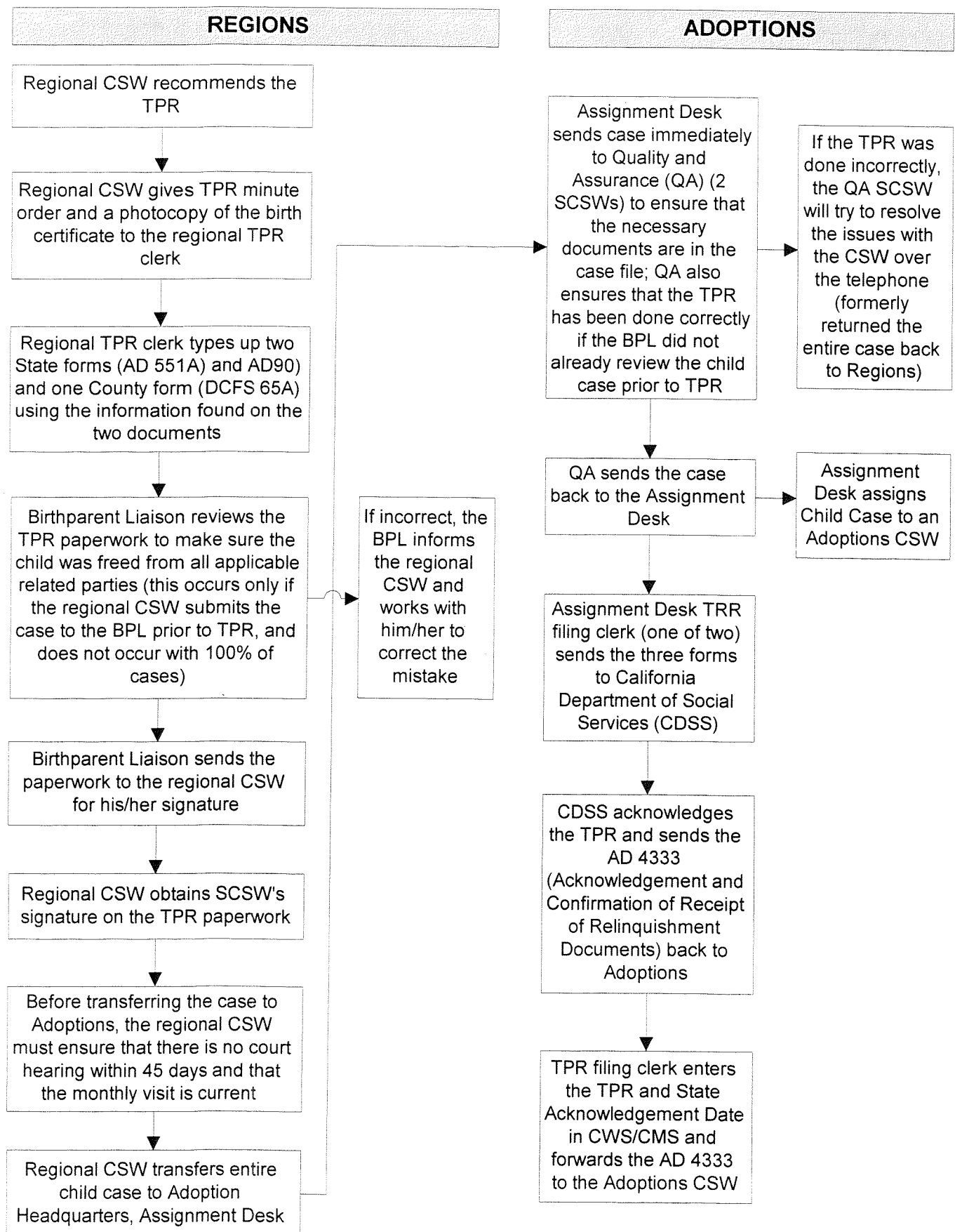
Recommendations

DCFS management:

- 28. Reinforce existing procedures prescribed by MCF, including filing requirements and documentation standards for ensuring case files provide a continuing account of the Department's involvement in providing services to the child.**
- 29. Monitor staff's compliance with documentation requirements and take appropriate disciplinary action for those who do not comply.**



TPR to State Acknowledgment Process





MARJORIE KELLY
Interim Director

County of Los Angeles DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

425 Shatto Place, Los Angeles, California 90020
(213) 351-5602

November 22, 2002

J. Tyler McCauley, Auditor-Controller
Auditor-Controller
525 Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration
500 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear Mr. McCauley:

DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES ADOPTIONS REVIEW

The Department of Children and Family Services reviewed the above report with your audit team on November 19, 2002. Your staff's time and efforts are appreciated in responding to the Department's request for assistance in streamlining our current adoptive processes to meet the goal of achieving expeditious permanency for our adoptive children.

We generally agree with the analyses and recommendations specified within the report. As we discussed in the meeting with your staff, we are committed to integrate the adoption processes and services within the regional line operations structure to achieve our stated permanency goal and intend to use your staff's review and recommendations towards that end.

If you have any questions regarding this response, please contact me at (213) 351-5614 or your staff can contact Elan Melamid at (213) 738-3264.

Sincerely,

Maryam Fatemi, Acting Bureau Chief
Children and Family Services

MF:HK:hk

c: Majorie Kelly
John Oppenheim
Elan Melamid

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